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Negotiating and Navigating the Rough Terrain of Transnational Feminist Research

By Tanya Bahkru¹

Abstract

This article examines aspects of feminist methodology pertinent to carrying out transnational research within an era of globalization. I explore the use of self-reflexivity, engagement with conceptualizations of insider/outsider, and the employment of feminist critiques of notions of objectivity within the research process as feminist methodological tools relevant to transnational feminist research. I argue that in an age of globalization, such methodological frameworks and tools are necessary in research committed to feminist contestations of globalization in that the nature of transnational research sustains an ever dynamic and shifting landscape of personal, political, and geographical relationships. This article draws upon my experiences carrying out transnational research in Ireland and the United States for my PhD dissertation between 2003 and 2007.

Keywords: transnational research, transnational feminism, feminist methodology

Introduction

Pursuing feminist research transnationally is rife with subtle and complex contradictions that play out in terms of shifting notions of identity and power dynamics between researcher and researched. Indeed, one of feminism's greatest contributions to the academy has been its serious critique of research methods and methodology. Feminist challenges to mainstream paradigms and discourses have contributed a significant critical voice to our understandings of the role of research, its formation, and its implementation. Changes have occurred on many levels including the theorization, conceptualization, and dissemination of knowledge and have influenced the ways in which knowledge is constituted and embodied (DeVault, 1999; Byrne and Lentin, 2000). In this article I will discuss several significant aspects of feminist methodology pertinent to carrying out transnational research within an era of globalization based on my own research experience.

Kum-Kum Bhavnani, in her work *Interconnections and Configurations: Toward a Global Feminist Ethnography*, asks if, "feminism can ever be more than a critique" (2007, p. 639). She argues that feminist research, and ethnographies in particular, focus attention on axes of inequality as "contours of difference" and present the opportunity to locate where "continuities and discontinuities in women's lives might speak to each other" (2007, p. 640). It is with such an intention that my own research project was conceived. Transnational feminist research methodology is in the making and reflected in it I found my own desire to be apart of an international movement for justice. The nature of globalization informs transnational feminist research and offers a chance to observe

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and engage in multi-sited, shifting, and often contradictory relationships with the researcher's geographical environment, research participants, and with one's own identity throughout the course of the research project. Transnational feminist research acknowledges the simultaneously constituting relationships between the local and global, employs tools of constant contextualization and historicization, and challenges hegemonic views of global capitalism (Mies, 2007; Bhavnani, 2007). As Kim (2007) states,

“...feminist research from ‘trans’ perspectives focuses on making linkages across social relations and places on multiple scales... They shift the analytical focus away from issues of representation, reflexivity, and positionality embedded in texts and move toward comparing localizing places and relations that are simultaneously affected by the same global processes” (p. 115)

In this way, through the use of self-reflexivity within the research process as a feminist methodological tool, exploring notions of insider/outsider, and engaging in feminist critiques of notions of objectivity, employing a transnational feminist framework to my endeavors solidified my commitment as feminist researcher to not only social analysis, but also to contribute to social transformation. In this article, I argue that in an age of globalization, such methodological frameworks and tools are necessary in carrying out research committed to feminist contestations of globalization in that the nature of transnational research sustains an ever dynamic and shifting landscape of personal, political, and geographical relationships.

Method

Recently I completed my PhD dissertation project entitled “Globalization and Reproductive Health: A Cross-Cultural Study” at University College Dublin, in Ireland. The study took place between 2003 and 2007 in both Ireland and the United States. My research project sought to first, examine how NGO project administrators negotiate cultural and economic discrepancies between external international influences (such as umbrella organizations or international agreements) on their NGO and their own local project beneficiaries; and second, to make connections between the culturally specific circumstances of NGOs located in different countries and the ways in which notions of choice and autonomy are constructed with regard to reproductive health within a globalized context. While these two research goals were the focal points of my overall research, I had a deeper motivation to make a connection visible between the ways in which economic, cultural, and political relationships between globalization and reproductive health NGOs were developed, and how these connections strengthen transnational feminist networking in the field of women's reproductive health and rights.

Initially, I conceived this research project as spanning three countries, India, Ireland, and the United States. My interest in India and the United States stemmed from my biracial heritage. My mother was born a Jew in the United States and my father was an Indian immigrant to the United States. The cultural and material differences that my parents faced throughout their lives, stemming from their upbringing in two very distinct parts of the world, has informed my own awareness and understanding of family

relations, power dynamics between men and women, poverty, notions of immodesty with regard to the body, and responsibility to one's community. These are all topics which could be placed in a larger global context to generate a unique and specific standpoint from which to examine reproductive health issues in both India and the U.S. In addition, the economic disparities between India and the United States provoked me to look at the gaps in wealth and standard of living between and within nations, how those disparities affect women in particular, and the desire for control they may have over their own reproductive lives? However, due to methodological and material limitations I decided eventually to omit the India case study from the final research project, which I will discuss later in this article. In turning to Ireland, my interest in the country grew out of my fascination with the dramatic ways in which Ireland has changed economically and culturally in a relatively short amount of time due to globalization. Much like my inquiries regarding India and the United States, I was compelled to ask in what ways such a transformation has changed the landscape of the regulation of women's reproductive health. Furthermore, I wanted to explore the possibility of comparing or contrasting the culturally specific circumstances of reproductive health for women in Ireland and the United States, given that we live in a globalized age where transnational cultural, political, and economic transfers occur on a regular basis. Ultimately, the final project consisted of case studies with two organizations, The Irish Family Planning Association and Planned Parenthood of San Diego and Riverside Counties.

In terms of method, my research study employed a mixture of tools. Specifically, I used a case study approach to examining these NGOs, as well as key elements of ethnography such as participant observation and qualitative interviewing. Those methods used in the research were not in themselves feminist, but rather classic ethnographic and sociological tools. However, such tools were reshaped and inflected by feminist perspectives. In maintaining a commitment to feminist contestation of globalization, an important dimension of my research was to make links between epistemologies and politics, knowledge and power. With this conviction, I aimed to ask research questions that provided a new way of understanding how women's reproductive lives in Ireland and the United States were affected by processes of globalization. In the context of my research I came to understand processes of globalization as those mechanisms which emerge from

...the closer integration of the countries and peoples of the world,
which has been brought about by the enormous reduction of costs of
transportation and communication, and the breaking down of
artificial barriers to the flows of goods, services, capital, knowledge,
and (to a lesser extent) people across borders (Stiglitz, 2002, p. 9).

My research with women's reproductive health NGOs in San Diego and Dublin showed such processes materializing in several specific ways. These included the crossing of borders in terms of goods, services, people, and ideology; negotiating and reflecting on the power dynamics implicit in transnational positionings by individuals within the organizations as well as the organizations overall; and the construction of notions of "choice" within global capitalist frameworks.

As I conducted two small-sized case studies, I was carrying out multi-sited research and attempting to create a situation where by the research project in each location was designed around connections with each other that would help to define and illustrate the focal points of the study (Marcus, 1995, p. 105). While the focus of each case study was a reproductive health-focused NGO, one in Ireland and one in the United States, each case study held the potential to stand alone in terms of the extent of detailed information and analysis at the same time. Ultimately, I tried to maintain the integrity of each case study and NGO while simultaneously drawing connections from my findings and analysis to a more expansive framework of reproductive health in contemporary globalization.

In commencing a search for organizations voluntarily willing to participate in the study, I relied on connections I had already established based on research done for a previous research project with two NGOs located in the United States, one in Washington DC (Choice USA), and one in San Diego (Planned Parenthood of San Diego and Riverside Counties). In finding an NGO to work with in Ireland however, I was heavily reliant upon contacts provided to me with the Irish Family Planning Association (IFPA). Upon moving to Ireland from California to conduct this research, I had no previous links whatsoever with individuals or organizations in the reproductive health rights field. I also found myself taking longer than expected to adjust to the cultural differences I was experiencing living in a foreign country. In this way, had I not been given initial contacts, I suspect it would have been much more difficult to facilitate a connection to the IFPA or to make my own links with reproductive health based organizations in Dublin.

During the time I spent with each NGO I collected data by means of participant observation including a limited document analysis and conducted semi-structured interviews with NGO project administrators/coordinators, all of which were done on a voluntary basis.

The primary method of data collection for this study was the use of participant observation. Observation took place onsite at the NGO office and project sites. Observation in the study included reading NGO-generated literature, brochures, announcements, documentaries and other written records that communicated the organizations' activities and gave insight into the inner workings of the NGO. In particular, I sought documents produced by each NGO or NGO affiliates during and around the time of this research project. I looked for these documents in archives or libraries (both material and virtual) kept by the organization in addition to those documents that surfaced as part of my daily work. Participation for this study included visiting project sites and attending any meetings and related events sponsored by the organization. I recorded the content of each meeting and day in the field with detailed field notes of the activities.

Observation was used to generate data about members' language, rhetoric, conversations, styles of behavior and group dynamics. Participant observation sees the actions, behaviors, interactions of people as the central ontological perspective (Mason, 2001). Observation allows the researcher access to the context within which participants act, behave and interact in their 'natural' setting or situations (Mason, 2001). By observing NGO employees, I aimed to generate information about the ways in which each NGO negotiated their role as a link between external factors and internal aims as well as the ways in which notions of choice and autonomy for women's reproductive

health were constructed. An example of this could be seen within the Irish context as immigration patterns in Ireland were changing dramatically due in part to the globalizing of the country and as a result NGO aims internally were shifting to address the needs of a dramatically diversifying constituency. Identifying needs, formulating action plans, and carrying out those plans were part of bridging external factors and internal aims. Simultaneously notions of choice with respect to reproductive health shifted and reworked themselves in direct relation to these factors.

The secondary method of data collection for the dissertation research was the use of semi-structured interviewing. The aim of the interviews was to generate a better and more thorough understanding of the nuances of the inner workings of the NGO, the relationships of NGO project coordinators with outside international influences, the implementation of NGO projects, and the beneficiaries that receive services. Using interviews is an effective method of examining the ways an individual's knowledge, views, understandings, interpretations, experiences, and interactions are significant to the social realities which this study seeks to investigate (Mason, 2001). I generated interview questions aimed at project administrators of both non-governmental organizations, the IFPA and PPSDRC. I felt that the interviewees would have organizational insights from their location working closely within the organizational structure, with outside international influences, and local beneficiaries.

Methodology

Despite what I now believe to be a solid and thorough sense of method embedded in the research, I initially found my research topic residing in uncertain territory, methodologically speaking. As I proceeded with the study, I became hyper-aware of being perceived as part of a hegemonic positioning and negotiating my role as an American academic researcher in relation to the transnational contexts and situations I was studying. My own accessibility to people, places, and resources in Ireland and my initial surprise at my inaccessibility to those same things in India propelled me to acknowledge that my own role in attempting to engage with feminist methodology within this dissertation project ran the risk of being highly problematic given the traditionally colonizing nature of research as well as the colonizing nature of globalization, a keystone linking each of the case studies. In fact, I initially conceived this research project as spanning three countries, India, Ireland, and the United States. However due to methodological and material limitations I decided not to include the India case study in the final research project. As Naples (2003) states,

“...the questions researchers ask are inevitably tied to particular epistemological understandings of how knowledge is generated.” (5)

Research, in seeking to produce knowledge, is couched in the epistemological understandings of the researcher and as such is embedded with imbalances of power which can and have been used to perpetuate colonialist practices among disenfranchised individuals and communities at the same time as those communities are the center of examination (Naples, 2003, p. 5) Throughout the research process I consistently asked myself, in what material ways am I benefiting from this research in relation to others involved in this process? How is the power I have at various levels within this process

fluctuating over time? Am I remaining committed to an agenda of social transformation? Is this research part of a social movement working against oppression and exploitation? Mies (2007) points out feminist research grew out of activism and social movements for change. She argues that as feminist researchers maintain an investment in seeing themselves as part of an international movement, create new learning processes from below and within, and explicitly acknowledge the connections between seemingly disparate oppressive systems a global perspective of liberation for feminist research can exist (667).

With these thoughts in mind, for the remainder of this paper I would like to take a closer look at the circumstances which compelled me to withhold the India case study from the final project as well as aspects of my own identity that came to play a role in my work in Dublin and San Diego. I will examine the role of self-reflexivity in my own feminist research process, and the notion of insider/outsider in relation to my own specific social location as both cultural insider and cultural outsider in terms of my identity as a researcher, Jewish American, and half-Indian second generation. Here I use self-reflexivity to indicate my own engagement with reflective practices such as acknowledging my own participation in the research as active, deliberate, situated and contextual as well as seeking to understand how such a role shapes the research process. Employing reflective strategies was of significance to me in carrying out transnational feminist research within a context of globalization specifically by acknowledging context, history, and mutually constituting relationships while exploring women's similar experiences in different spaces. In this way, self-reflexivity was significant as I observed that *lack* of transparency or reflexivity were some of the most exploitative aspects of globalization. Furthermore, issues of identity and insider/outsider status which arose from self-reflexive practice contributed to my decision to omit the India section of the research, and had an impact on my U.S. and Ireland-based work. I will conclude with a brief reflection on the constitution of knowledge relative to my own research process. I believe these topics represent a range of issues concerning the negotiation of difference (i.e. gender, race, nationality, sexuality, age, etc.) which are pertinent in feminist research and the construction of knowledge within a framework of transnational feminist methodology.

Self-Reflexivity

By introducing and implementing ideas of self-reflexivity, feminist research has challenged mainstream social and scientific practice by exposing bias in research design and topic choice, exposing the overall exclusion of women within social scientific research and flaws in understandings of objectivity. Going beyond the purpose of research in and of itself, feminists have encouraged women to engage and become active through research and education.

Reinharz (1992) emphasizes the importance of reflexivity in the research process, stating that reflexivity on the part of feminist ethnographers and participant observation research suggests that the researcher will not always be able to control her experience and relationships in the field (see also Mason, 2001, and Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). This idea of integrated learning and dialectical knowledge production contradicts the mainstream assumption that the researcher can control her stance or be placed outside the circumstances of the situation she is observing. Furthermore, as Nancy Naples (2003)

argues, the practice of self-reflexivity has been greatly informed by third world and post-colonialist feminist theorists who “argue for self reflexive understandings of the epistemological investments that shape the politics of method” (p. 41). In other words, coming from a feminist perspective requires the acknowledgment of power dynamics and an assessment of gains and losses for those individuals participating in throughout the research process. Specifically within context of my research on globalization and reproductive health, I have been influenced by the aim of those feminists who seek an approach to understanding globalization that “makes transparent opaque relations of power endemic to globalization” (Adams, 2002, p. 3). Ultimately, this means challenging the assumption of neutrality, recognizing that research is a political process, and therefore moving towards a demystification of the process all together.

Gatenby and Humphries (2000) add to this discussion by stating that, “Researchers are not separate, neutral academics theorizing about others, but co-researchers or collaborators with people working towards social equality” (p. 90). It was part of my feminist research process to identify and work though power differentials between participants and researchers as well as participants amongst themselves. Power differentials are in fact, always part of the dynamics of research. Coming from a feminist perspective requires the acknowledgment of power dynamics and the rethinking of the validity of research as process and knowledge creator (Gatenby and Humphries, 2000, p. 90).

Engaging in self-reflexivity also requires researchers to acknowledge that there may be variation in their levels of commitment and participation to a research project for a variety of reasons. We must ask ourselves also, how we can measure the consistency and level of commitment a researcher has on a day to day basis over the course of the research? Is it useful, or should it be expected, to take into account what is going on in the life of the researcher (emotionally, personally, financially, etc.) and interrogate how these elements may affect the research project design and implementation, and the extent to which these issues are relevant within a framework of self-reflexivity in research?

Cope (2002) proposes that self-reflexivity includes expanding our view to include all forms and intersections of oppression occurring in the subject and circumstance of our research that are socially and spatially constructed (p.55). This provokes researchers to ask questions differently, reevaluate our data collection process, rethink the ways in which we interpret data and produce “results,” and “demands that we represent our research in ways that are sensitive to all the multifarious forms of oppression that influence the processes, people, and events we study...” (Cope, 2002, p. 55). I have found comfort in this idea. I find that Cope’s argument resonated with my own sense of accountability in that moment and historically to the people, situations, and events that contextualized the research experience. Cope’s argument encapsulates the ways in which I have reformed my own notions and presumptions of globalization and women’s reproductive health throughout this research process, including the carrying out of the U.S. and Irish case studies as well as the omission of the India case study. By asking myself key questions such as, what counts as worthy of academic inquiry; in what ways do I have authority to assess the situations I will engage with during research; and who will gain from this research project, I felt that I was able to hold myself more accountable to a feminist research agenda of contributing to social change and minimize reinforcing exploitative research practices. The mere process of engaging with these questions

allowed me to acknowledge my own contextual positionality as an individual participating in globalization and attempting to carry out transnational research.

The topic of research for my Master's degree examined the ways in which globalization had impacted reproductive health NGOs in India. With that in mind, and because I had worked in India before on a closely related topic and had grown up half Indian in a mixed race household, I felt I would be well equipped emotionally and intellectually to easily engage in a placement with an Indian NGO. Although I had originally conducted field work in Mumbai with an NGO called Committed Communities Development Trust, when time came to reestablish connections in the hope of finding an NGO with whom to do field work with for my current research, I was left with no fruit-bearing prospects. I had exhausted the avenues available to me through this previous experience as well as other resources and contacts that I had acquired through networking at conferences and relations with other academics in related fields.

At first this was a very difficult and frustrating process requiring a lot of determination and diligence. Knowing from past experience that NGOs in India frequently work under circumstances of power outages and limited technological resources, I patiently waited for emails to be returned, faxes to go through and phones to be answered as I pursued the possibility of taking a placement in either New Delhi or Mumbai with an NGO there. However, after months of unproductive efforts, I began to reflect, as described in an excerpt from my field journal below, on my epistemological assumptions about the status of feminist organizing around reproductive health rights in India and why my attempts to connect with an organization were not working.

About ten days ago I made at least a dozen phone calls to several different NGOs both in New Delhi and Mumbai. A couple of times my call didn't go through. A few times it sounded like I was getting a fax machine. And a few times I spoke to someone who either told me to call back or took a message. I still haven't had any responses from those messages left or from the emails I sent out two weeks ago. I'm starting to feel really frustrated and I'm not sure what I should do next. I may have to cut this case study if I don't get any promising results. One response that I did get from a Planned Parenthood affiliated NGO in New Delhi told me that they require a one year minimum commitment. And I don't have the resources to commit one year for just this part of the project. On the other hand, how would I really be able to understand the India context without living there for at least a year? I'm only now starting to feel mildly comfortable with my work here in Dublin and I think living in New Delhi for a year would be a much greater adjustment (Bakhru, Field Journal, November 9, 2004).

I began to realize that my knowledge and previous experience, including my own racial identity, would clearly not be enough to initiate an evaluation of the status of reproductive health care in India. In any event, perhaps the reason I was getting little response from NGOs in India was due in part to power differentials embedded in my role as an American researcher. After all, having lived in Dublin for nearly two years I was only just then starting to understand the landscape of the research I was doing for the Irish case study.

The fluctuation I experienced in my own identity as a bi-racial American studying in Ireland and attempting to conduct research in multiple locations was an aspect of the research process which influenced my expectations and limitations over time and created an impetus to utilize tools of self-reflexivity. The time I spent doing research provided that various aspects of my own identity come to the fore that were different in Dublin, San Diego, or in my pursuit of doing field work in India (Wolf, 1996, p. 11). Furthermore, as I began to travel more frequently between Ireland and the United States, such fluctuations identity became underscored.

For example, while researching in Dublin my national identity as American stood out far more than any racialized identity I felt. While working with NGO administrators as an intern with the IFPA, attending conferences or academic events with colleagues, in social situations, or while engaging in mundane daily tasks like buying groceries in a shop or riding in a taxi, I was consistently introduced as or referenced as “the American student,” “doing work with us from America,” or “in Dublin over from America.” In an entry from my field journal about ten months into the research process, I wrote the following:

This afternoon my supervisor and I had a short meeting, about 30 minutes, to check in on my work and experience with the IFPA. We met in her office on the top floor of the building overlooking the back end of Trinity College and the DART [Dublin Area Rapid Transit] station. During that meeting, she informed me that there is another American expected in the week of June 15 to do some work for the IFPA and some of the work we have been doing will be shifted around. Her mention of “another American” really underscored that my identity as American is really at the forefront of my interactions, something that I have been noticing more and more since I got to Dublin, UCD, and the IFPA respectively. When my internship supervisor said “another American” I wondered who is this other American and is her American-ness the same as mine? Our national identities became our defining feature. So often I find myself being introduced as “the American” whether it is social situations with friends I have made here or at lectures or a conference that I went to with my academic advisor or other colleagues from UCD (University College Dublin). Even taxi drivers seem to make conversation with me based on their related experiences with America(ns). In many ways this seems very strange to me in that I don’t usually think of myself as American. In addition, those aspects of my identity that I usually define myself by, such as my mixed race or sexual orientation, are totally overshadowed in these contexts. This experience, although it was only a minute or two long has made a deep impression on me. I realize I have not yet spent time reflecting on what “being an American” means both within the context of living among other Americans in the United States or now living in Dublin while studying globalization, many of the aspects of which made it possible for me to be here and informed the research questions I am asking in the first place. What do individuals here see when they see me as American (Bakhru, Field Journal, June 2, 2004)?

In relation to the kind of experience the above excerpt describes Visweswaran (1994) states,

Certainly the question, 'Where are you from?' is never an innocent one. Yet not all subjects have equal difficulty in replying. To pose a question of origin to particular subjects is to subtly pose a question of return, to challenge not only temporally, by geographically, one's place in the present. For someone who is neither fully Indian nor wholly American, it is a question that provokes failure of confidence, the fear of never replying adequately (p. 115).

As I continued on in carrying out research in changing geographic locations I found the instability Visweswaran describes to be prevalent. As I became more comfortable living in Dublin, as I began to carry out the San Diego portion of the research project, and as my own perception of myself at a personal level changed over the course of time I felt my own place in each context carry a tapestry of meaning.

Insider/Outsider

These reflections led me to consider another vital aspect of feminist methodology, particularly salient in transnational research, that of the notion of insider/outsider. Feminist debates surrounding the notion of insider/outsider tend to revolve around whether it is better to conduct fieldwork as an "insider" or "outsider" to the community. Consequently, researchers are forced to re-examine assumptions about how knowledge is constituted both in terms of "indigenous" knowledge, and how researchers negotiate their position to become more sensitive to the views of those they are researching (Naples, 2003, p. 49). However, such bipolarity between insider and outsider has the potential to mask "power differentials and experiential differentials between the researcher and researched" (Naples, 2003, p. 49). For the purposes of my research, a dichotomous approach to understanding the relationship between insider and outsider was not appropriate in that I was, in varying instances, simultaneously both insider and outsider in relation to my research subject. Furthermore, my own sense of insider-ness or outsider-ness changed significantly over time. An experience towards the end of my time in Dublin underscored this idea. I wrote in my field journal,

Today began a Tuesday like any other Tuesday I had in Dublin since I moved here two years ago. The sky was a gloomy gray and when I woke up this morning I was reminded that I could not count on blue skies and the warm sun shining today, as I would were I at home in California. I should probably know better by now, but I still can't seem to get over the weather here. I went about the usual business of my day, looking forward to a 3:00 p.m. press conference to launch the Irish Family Planning Association's new campaign, Safe and Legal in Ireland, promoting safe and legal abortion in Ireland and lifting the present ban. The IFPA chairperson, CEO, and official campaign spokesperson were present along with various members of the community, press, and other relevant

organizations in Dublin. About ten or fifteen minutes into the press conference ten protestors tried to shove their way into the meeting room, chanting “Abortion is Murder!!” and yelling abusive and violent slogans, some aimed at a specific member of the panel. From where I was sitting I couldn’t really see properly what the crowd looked like although they sounded like a band of about fifty. So fervent on their position and so convinced of their moral high ground, their intensity caused me to become overwhelmed with instant fear and anxiety. All the photographers in attendance for the press conference ran out to capture the sensational spectacle. My own immediate reaction was to get out of the room as quickly as possible. Images of a nurse who was critically injured while caught in a bomb explosion that killed a security guard outside a family planning clinic in the U.S. raced through my mind and my imagination went wild with fear of being injured or shot. (I had to ask myself later, is it only the Americans who are convinced that all anti-choice protestors are bound to be carrying guns?) I realize this was an extreme way to look at things, but at the same time my heart felt like it was about to pound out of my chest. As I look back on this event, I see this one instance as a convergence of the personal and political, the local and the global both in terms of my own individual experience and wider movements for women’s rights, and fuel for my desire to work on this issue. (Bakhrui, Field Journal, August 9, 2005).

In this way we are never fully outside or inside the research “community”. Our relationship to the “community” is constantly being negotiated and renegotiated through our daily interactions. These interactions serve to reposition gender, race, and class, relations at the immediate level (Naples, 2003, p. 49).

Another perspective on this issue is offered by Uma Narayan (1998) who discusses the issues of heterogeneity within feminist dialogue between people who may, although do not necessarily, share a common oppression. Narayan argues that those individuals who are non-members of a particular oppressed group can inadvertently and unintentionally marginalize or appropriate the experience of those members of the oppressed group by not recognizing the variation in experience that occurs within the lives of individuals. Most salient here is the point made by Narayan concerning the intellectual space between “insiders and outsiders.”

Narayan argues that in order to work in coalition it is imperative that groups work across difference. She contends that it is not enough to simply acknowledge difference although that is a starting point. Narayan (1998) states,

Liberal democracy’s ideas of a ‘civic public’, and of public realm of the state that somehow expresses ‘the impartial and universal point of view of normative reason’ seem to serve to cover up the racism and sexism that are endemic to modern politics (p. 33).

Therefore, it is important to develop theory and research practices which not only creates space for variety in culture and experience but affirms these differences as well. Beyond

that, Narayan argues that feminists must transcend a complacent stance of acceptance and continuously sift through the conflict and friction that can arise when working through and not just around difference.

The simultaneous constitution of identity and social location of insider/outsider has been in constant motion for me in relation to all the various geographical locations of this research. As half-Indian, half-Jewish American raised in the U.S., I do not feel that I fit into hegemonic norms which inform identity and ways of knowing the world. Yet in the context of doing transnational research For these reasons I take comfort in Narayan's notions of working through rather than around difference; a strategy which is critical in carrying out feminist research and in achieving an understanding of how knowledge is created and constituted.

Objectivity

While many feminist critiques of the research process have been made, as a feminist researcher I still struggle with coming to terms with the concept of "objective" knowledge. Within feminist critiques of science (and in the case of my own research, social science) there have been many debates surrounding the question of "objectivity" and whether such a thing can exist within feminist research and in what form it should take. This debate is due in part to a Eurocentric legacy of the Enlightenment out of which feminism has grown. This tradition of Enlightenment thinking has transcended throughout decades to produce what is now seen as a kind of masculinist, hierarchical, and patriarchal approach towards knowledge generation. It also typically serves to reinforce existing inequalities in society rather than change them. However, feminists often find themselves in a precarious situation, realizing that the characteristics which inform Enlightenment thinking, such as reason, linear progress, the existence of a knowable reality, free will and choice, and individuality can also be found as a basis for feminist analyses. Indeed, it is exactly these ideologies upon which feminist critiques of science and the research process are made. Furthermore, while many feminists acknowledge the difficulty and problematic nature of constructing a feminist way of doing "objective" research, as a community we are hesitant to completely throw the idea to the wind leaving room for only absolute relativism.

Meghan Cope (2002) asks the same question I found myself asking at these crossroads: "Where do we go from here? Is science salvageable in any form? Or must we all just wallow in a sea of subjectivity and relativism with no universal truths upheld by the public?" (p. 48). Like other feminist scholars before her, Cope articulates that knowledge is constructed and produced by human actors which means there are multiple and even contradictory perspectives, interpretations, and uses of knowledge (p. 43). There is not just one, hegemonic way of knowing the world. To the contrary, many epistemologies are possible in the research process. Cope adds that researchers' perspectives influence their privileging of different types of knowledge which in turn affects how they formulate their research questions, which topics they choose, and the ways in which they communicate results.

The apparently dichotomous situation between producing objective as opposed to relative knowledge continuously proves to be problematic for feminists. Feminist researchers readily acknowledge the historically exclusionary nature "objective and rational" science has taken in vis-à-vis women of intersecting identities and other

marginalized groups. Many of the functions of an Enlightenment approach to science, such as the reliance on assumed dualisms or an inflexible scientific method, have been used to justify the subordination of such groups in an effort to maintain a patriarchal society and white male privilege. This includes the search for and assumption of objectivity in research and its consequent validation of knowledge.

How is it possible for feminist researchers to effectively use the tools of science and seek out “objectivity” within their research in order to create a climate for social change and gender equity when it is these very concepts that have been used to subordinate women? As Audre Lorde (2001) has often been quoted, “For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (p. 23). From this perspective it is impossible to seek out true “objectivity” and use it to create long lasting social justice and gender equity because such a concept is a construct of patriarchal knowledge.

I found myself continuously returning to Audre Lorde’s warning and to Meghan Cope’s question throughout the research process. In fact, many feminists in research have been active in the critique of a patriarchal sense of impartial knowledge bringing in the role of experience, theories of standpoint, and questioning the concept of universal knowledge. Yet, there is still a need to perpetuate some kind of sense of “objectivity” that can exist, and this will at some point exclude and marginalize those very voices feminist inquiry seeks out.

If the production of knowledge is an active process involving differently situated actors, we would expect that people’s experiences, identities, and social locations will influence what they count as knowledge and how they participate in its production and legitimization (Cope, 2002, p. 45).

For these reasons, I argue that it is not possible for feminist researchers to produce objective knowledge and simultaneously resist relativism in the existing space of conceptual frameworks of feminist knowledge generation. In examining Donna Haraway’s notion of *situated knowledge*, I contend that it is only by creating a new paradigm within feminist approaches to research and scientific inquiry that a reconciliation of objective knowledge and the feminist pursuit of social justice can occur without resignation to relativism.

As part of our modes of thinking, some feminist researchers seek out systematic methods of research that provide us with the means to claim an authority of a material reality and establish criteria for objectivity. It is through these rules and methods that feminists seek objectivity, an accurate and true understanding of the world. But in the process of searching for a material understanding of the world problems arise.

Feminist researchers have turned to various versions of scientific methods of social investigation in their efforts to establish general and authoritative knowledge of gendered social realities that everyone can believe. But the simplest of feminist questions raise in practice a series of problems about how to judge between different claims of what is ‘really’ the case” (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002, p. 44).

These problems come out of how one determines what is true. Are attempts to be objective really so? And who determines such criteria?

Closely related to the discourse surrounding objectivity is a discussion and need for validity within feminist research. An examination of validity within a feminist context is crucial because it is at this juncture that issues of power are most apparent. When knowledge, experience, claims, or information is perceived as valid, they contain real and material power with real and material consequences. As Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) state, "Feminists want to understand actual power relations and the nature of persistent inequalities so that people can work to transform these effectively" (p. 57). Acknowledging power relations within knowledge production means acknowledging that this process is political and manufactured. Therefore, knowledge cannot be separated from its process of production.

As a result of feminist examinations of power/knowledge relationships several theories of how to undergo objective feminist research have been proposed. Sandra Harding (1993), for example, offers a solution to this debate through what she calls "strong objectivity" (p. 51). By invoking strong objectivity Harding seeks to make feminist research more objective and more rigorous. Her critique of normative scientific practice is not so much that it is biased or non-objective but rather that it is not objective enough. Harding seeks to create a truer truth and a more objective objectivity. In other words, from the standpoint of those groups who are marginalized, dominant perspectives of truth are not objective (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002, p. 63) because those who control the means of knowledge production also control the means and context in which that knowledge is interpreted. In this sense Harding argues that "bad science" means recognizing and maintaining inequalities within science that limit marginalized groups' access to the station of producers of knowledge. Harding also argues that standpoint theory takes on the viewpoint that multiple perspectives are valid in as much as they are genuinely held by people coming from different standpoints and advocates that science is an expression of power and oppression (Moss, 2002, p. 47).

These points are well taken and have complicated the means by which we generate and constitute knowledge. However, what is left unanswered is the question of who it is that decides when something *is* objective enough and how this approach breaks down oppressive practices within methods of inquiry themselves. In other words what is the power relation between the knowledge that is produced, the process of production, and who determines the criteria of its validity?

Under these circumstances, it seems feminist researchers as well as feminist research is stuck in one of the dichotomies they have critiqued and tried to escape from. However, there have been attempts to break down exactly this kind of binary. Donna Haraway (1991) tackles the problematic debate surrounding notions of 'objectivity' and proposes a new framework within which feminist research can take place.

Haraway (1991) states,

So, I think my problem and 'our' problem is how to have simultaneously an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects...and a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a 'real world'... (p.187).

Haraway proposes *situated knowledges* and argues that there should not be a dichotomous relationship between objectivity and subjectivity. She argues for “a feminist doctrine of embodied objectivity that accommodates paradoxical and critical feminist science projects: feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges* (1991, p.188). This “embodied knowledge” addresses the need for a space within knowledge generation that allows for complexity and contradiction. Furthermore, Haraway states that embodied knowledge rejects relativism and can become a catalyst for social change (1991, p.191-192). This approach to objectivity will not only allow for a multiplicity of knowledges but will also bring about transformative social change. Haraway argues that science brings together partial views and it is therefore not within a single view that one finds science (1991, p.196). What she is advocating for is not so much a reinterpretation of pre-existing forms of thinking but rather the creation of a new space and approach to thinking within an existing framework.

An example of this can be seen within data analysis and interpretation. Data analysis from a feminist research perspective, incorporating the theories of Harding and Haraway, should be sensitive to how gender, race, class, sexuality, etc. influences the production of knowledge and the ways in which the researcher and participants have impacted the outcome and collection of data.

This is akin to Haraway’s concept of a situated knowledge where the context of the researcher, the subjects, and the place (both social and physical) are taken into account in the analysis to understand how gender influences the production of knowledge: who produces ‘legitimate’ knowledge, how it is produced, whether and how that production is contested, and in what broader context knowledge is created and re-created (Moss, 2002, p. 51).

In this sense, the researcher must acknowledge her own gendered, racialized, sexualized, or globalized experience within the research process and how that influences the results of the project. The creation of new spaces and modes for thinking is what makes such an approach functional and holistic. Moss states,

Conclusion

Underlying my entire research process has been a deep experiential understanding of exactly that messiness and complicatedness Moss describes, the most pertinent example being my decision to omit the India portion of the dissertation or engage in transnational feminist research within an era of globalization. Throughout this dissertation I have been in a state of perpetual renegotiation of my own position within the research process. Dealing with the resulting challenges, set-backs, and forming different ways of engaging in feminist modes of inquiry have all been a crucial part of negotiating my own identity while trying to carry out international research within a context of globalization. Each of these elements has been significant and important to each other in the formulation of this research project. In this way I continue to seek to

make the production and politics of the ways in which I present data and the “realities” concerning women’s reproductive lives transparent.

One hope I have for my research project is that it will contribute in some way to informing women’s reproductive health NGOs’ means of coalition-building and advocating transnationally. “Cross-cultural research is a necessary design if generalizations are to be produced that are not ethnocentric” (Reinharz, 1992, p.166). Within this framework, feminist participation in the reproductive health rights movement will necessarily facilitate some heterogeneity of common interests or experience. As a result, such groups organizing based on common identity will ultimately be faced with issues of difference whether it is in their own local location or when working across borders. It is at that time when coalitions must work to forge paths of understanding. Narayan (1998) identifies two main reasons why coalitions breakdown: “1) people do not learn to trust one another across divisive social differences, and 2) people do not learn how to sustain working relationships in contexts of sometimes powerful distrust and disagreement” (p. 33). In situations such as these, unless issues of marginalization and “othering” are addressed, progressive movement will not be able to occur.

To complicate the argument further, as feminists we must also take into consideration critiques of the infallible appearance of western feminist foundations. Marina Lazreg (1988) has criticized western feminism(-ists) for operating on the grounds that “their societies are perfectible” (p. 326). This assumption pervades feminist discourse in that it assumes a western normative model. Lazreg (1988) states,

‘Eastern feminists’ writing for a western audience about women in their home countries have done so with the generally unstated assumption that U.S. feminist knowledge can be expanded or accommodated but seldom questioned (p. 327).

In the setting of transnational feminist networking this can prove to be highly problematic. Presumptions of a western feminist paradigm and consequently the depletion of marginalized voices and the taking on of a reductionist approach to difference are directly related to the break in coalition and proactive movement discussed by Narayan.

In my own research processes of self-reflection and investigation into notions of insider/outsider, I have had to interrogate my epistemic privilege and social location and ask myself to what extent does a wider feminist discourse address difference and marginalization? And, in our practice of addressing these issues, are we inadvertently essentializing that difference? It is vital that feminists ask these questions if we are to build coalitions and work together towards creating and strengthening global feminist politics in a move towards conducting truly transnational research. Placing these concepts within the framework of transnational coalition building and politics in a time of globalization and international development could provide further insights into the ways in which marginalization in feminist activist and scholarly arenas is addressed.

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